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'THEY ALL ENCOURAGED ME TO DO IT, BUT AFTER ALL, THE DECISION IS MINE':
Marriage Practices among Diaspora Somalis in Finland

Abstract

This article has two main goals. First, it describes the processes and practices of Somali marriages in Finland, in order to help fill the gap in the literature on Somali marriage practices. Particular attention is paid to three major aspects of the marriage process: finding a spouse, organising the marriage arrangements and the celebrations. The second goal is to contribute to the current debate on migration and arranged marriages. In doing so, particular attention is paid to the role of the family in these three aspects of marriage. This article draws from 35 individual interviews, participant observations in five marriage ceremonies, as well as five focus group discussions. I argue that, despite the deep involvement of family members in the marriage process, unlike in forced and (common) arranged marriages, Somali couples take a leading role and make major decisions, although they are expected to seek their parents' consent.

Keywords

Marriage practices • Migration • Arranged marriage • Forced marriage • Finnish Somalis

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Introduction

This article fills the gap in the literature on Somali marriage and shows that Somali marriage, as a rule, does not obstruct the agency and the autonomy of the couple. Little has been written about the marriage process among Somalis in general and among the diasporic Somalis in particular. Lewis's (1994) and Luling and Adam's (2015) studies represent the meagre scholarly literature that examines Somali marriage institution and describes its process and practices in a systematic manner. Lewis (1994) addresses marriages in the nomadic culture of northwestern Somalia. A large proportion of Somali people in other regions are also from this nomadic cultural background. Luling and Adam (2015), on the other hand, consider the case of the settled agriculturalists in southern Somalia, and their ethnographic data is collected from both Afgooye and London. The first part of the paper describes how weddings were performed in Afgooye, a small agro-pastoral town in the west of Mogadishu, in the 1970s and 1980s. The second part describes the ways in which marriage has changed, both in post-Civil War Afgooye and among Afgooye immigrants in the UK. These two traditional marriage customs in Somalia and the variations between them are somewhat moderated by the massive urbanisation of the past 60 years and, to a large extent, by the internal and external migration of a large proportion of the Somali people. Tiilikainen, Ismail and Al-Sharmani (2016) briefly discuss both aspects of marriage practices in Somalia and how they have changed in the diaspora.[1]

There is a growing political and public debate on arranged marriages among the Muslim migrant communities in Europe and elsewhere, which has resulted in the 'politicisation of the family' (Grillo 2008: 9). Two features make the Somali marriage relevant in this debate. First, the family is heavily involved in the marriage process, and second, Somali families have extensive transnational ties and networks that influence the marriage (Al-Sharmani & Ismail 2017).

In the Nordic countries, the debate has presented Muslim marriage practices as problematic, traditional, monolithic and oppressively patriarchal (Häkkinen 2016: 11) and has attracted considerable attention from policy-making circles, academic research and the media. However, within these countries, there are differences in terms of both the focus of the debate and policy responses (Eggebø 2010; Liversage & Rytter 2015; Pellander 2015; Razack 2004).

Arranged marriages are a typical example of marriage practices that have been associated with Muslim migrants. In this article, arranged marriage is understood as 'the families of both spouses take a leading role in arranging the marriage, but the choice whether to solemnise the arrangement remains with the spouses and can be exercised at any time. The spouses have the right to choose – to say no – at any time' (Home Office 2000: 10). Conversely, a forced marriage is 'conducted without the valid consent of both parties, where duress is a factor' (Ibid: 6). I also maintain that there is a wide range of forms of arranged marriages (Shaw 2001: 323–324; Stopes-Roe & Cochrane 1990: 30). In addition, the contrast between love

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marriages and arranged marriages is rightly questioned (Shaw 2001: 324; Shaw & Charsley 2006: 416). In this article, choice is simply understood as an individual's right to select a partner and accept a marriage proposal, and absence of a right to choose is what makes a marriage a forced one (Home Office 2000).

This debate is important here for a number of reasons (Grillo 2011: 80). First, it has been argued that transnational arranged marriages are detrimental to the social welfare system and produce a parallel society in the country of settlement. It has been argued that this is so because, on the one hand, migrants are predominantly from societies that are backward and unable to adapt to life in the West and, on the other hand, arranged marriages continuously reproduce the customs and ways of life led by first-generation immigrants and thus further hamper the integration process. The result is the emergence of a social underclass, in which the majority of the first-generation immigrants and their descendants lack the necessary skills for employment and thus become dependent on social welfare. The impact is a radical transformation of the egalitarian welfare society of the receiving countries. Therefore, by hindering the integration process, this kind of marriage migration is a threat to social welfare. Many of these studies are based on cases in the Nordic countries (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Hagelund 2008; Wikan 2002). The main message of these voices is, as Sherene Razack puts it, that 'Muslims come to the West drawn to its superior wealth. They bring with them a hopelessly feudal culture and must either be stopped altogether or be forcibly "deculturalised" before they multiply and contaminate the superior civilisation into which they have migrated' (Razack 2004: 131–132).

Secondly, another argument in the debate is that foreigners use marriage as a means to settle legally in Western Europe, and thus, arranged marriage is considered a strategy for migration and an avenue to the 'promised land' (Timmerman 2006: 125–128). For some countries, this has consequently led to the tightening of immigration policies in order to control the migration inflows (Liversage & Rytter 2015; Pellander 2015).

Thirdly, and most importantly, by equating arranged marriage to forced marriage in public and political debates, the arranged marriage is associated with a number of humanitarian concerns with regard to individuals, particularly women and children (Okin 1999; Wikan 2002; see Hagelund 2008 for a nice summary of this debate in the Scandinavian countries). This debate has encouraged the development of selective migration control measures (Gangoli *et al.* 2011: 31). It has also provided the means for radical right parties to build and capitalise on the situation for their own agendas (Siim and Skjeie 2008: 324).[2] In Finland, where Somalis represent the largest Muslim community, some organisations have tried to encourage the Finnish government to follow the example of other Nordic countries by outlawing forced marriage. However, the actual consequences of such efforts are unclear. The lack of a clear distinction between forced and arranged marriages is a main concern in this discourse (Bonjour & Kraler 2015). For instance, a piece published by a main daily newspaper, entitled 'Hints of arranged marriages among immigrants in Finland', noted that, 'In Finland today, falling in love and personal choice are the important factors in choosing a partner. The idea of an arranged marriage is seen as a violation of human rights. This is not the case in the cultures of many immigrants' (Hyvärinen 2002). This sounds like a reflection of the Danish Government's action plan on arranged, quasi-forced and forced marriages (Liversage & Rytter 2015: 137).

In this debate, arranged marriages are considered detrimental to human rights and the economy (Eggebø 2010; Hagelund 2008; Pellander 2015; Razack 2004). To make the argument more appealing, arranged marriages are often conflated with forced marriage, wherein a lack of autonomy and agency among the young couple, particularly the girl, is the norm in most of the cases (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Eggebø 2010; Liversage & Rytter 2015). A number of factors that annul, or at least mitigate, the autonomy and the agency of the young people in these marriages is presented: i.e. the role of parents in the decision-making process (Eggebø 2010; Liversage 2012; Rytter 2012), cousin or close-relative marriage (Eggebø 2010; Liversage & Rytter 2015; Rytter 2012), searching for a partner from the country of origin (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Liversage 2012; Liversage & Rytter 2015; Rytter 2012) and the type of new household for the young couple (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Liversage 2012; Rytter 2012).

This article has two main goals. Firstly, by describing the processes and practices of Somali marriages in Finland, this article will help fill the gap in the literature on Somali marriage. In what follows, particular attention is given to three dimensions of the marriage process: spouse selection, organising marriage and celebrations. Secondly, by examining these dimensions of the marriage process, this article shows that Somali marriage, as a rule, does not obstruct the agency and the autonomy of couple in the marriage process and thus it will contribute to the debate on migration and arranged marriages.

The first section of the article presents a brief description of the Somali community in Finland and the second section summarises the research background of the study. In Section 3, I describe marriage processes and practices among the diasporic[3] Somalis in Finland. This section has three main subsections: meeting and selecting the marriage partner, organising marriages and marriage celebrations. The final section concludes the article.

Somalis in Finland

In 2015, the number of foreign language speakers in Finland was 310,306 out of the total population of 5,471,753. In the early 1990s, a large group of Somali asylum seekers, escaping the Civil War, started arriving in Finland. In 2015, Somalis formed the third-largest immigrant group in the country, after Russians and Estonians. As Figure 1 shows, >60% of the 17,871 Somalis were ≤24 years old. Gender-wise, 8,521 were female and 9,350 male. A remarkably large number of the Finnish-Somalis (13,485) live in the Uusimaa region, particularly in Greater Helsinki[4] (Statistics Finland 2015).

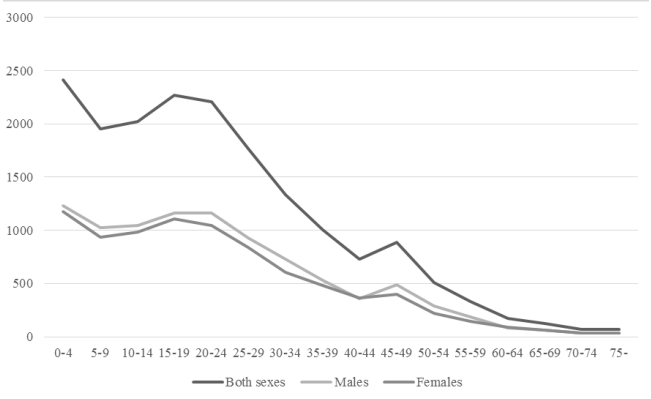

Figure 1. Somali-Speaking Population in Finland: Gender and Age Group, 2015
Source: Statistics Finland 2015, Population Structure.

However, Somalis in Finland face a great number of challenges: Adults face a harsh situation in the labour market. Their children have the highest school dropout rate and the poorest educational achievements compared to other communities. Identity crises and lack of belonging are also major problems among the Somali youth and children (OSF 2013). Notable difficulties within the family are also reported: in 2012, when 46% of Finnish-Somalis were children <18 years old, 38% of these children were raised by single mothers (Helminen & Pietiläinen 2014).

Data and Methods

This article is primarily based on 35 individual interviews, where the gender breakdown was 17 women (six single, seven married and four divorced) and 18 men (five single, eight married and five divorced), as well as observations and notes collected from five wedding ceremonies. In addition, five focus groups (two with women, two with men and one a mixed gender group) inform my analysis. The total number of participants in the focus group discussions was 39.

Interviews were conducted from the autumn of 2013 to the autumn of 2014, and the informants were recruited through personal networks and organisations. My colleague Mulki Al-Sharmani and I conducted all interviews. Al-Sharmani conducted all the interviews with female subjects, I conducted all the interviews with males, and we co-conducted one mixed-gender focus group. All interviewees were immigrants of Somali background, and all interviews were conducted in Somali. The age range of individual informants was early twenties to early fifties, with an average age of 28 and 38 for women and men, respectively. The interviewees' duration of residence in Finland was between 5 and 24 years. On average, women had stayed about 19 years, while men had stayed slightly >19 years in Finland. In addition, I conducted participant observations at five ceremonies, in which Islamic marriage contracts were officiated, in different parts of Helsinki: two in a mosque, two in private residences and one in a meeting hall in a public building.

Most of the informants were married to other Somalis; only one divorcee and two married persons had been married to a non-Somali-speaking spouse. Most of the married informants had married after they had migrated to Finland and were married in Finland, while most of the divorcees, six out of nine, were married outside Finland. Most of those who got married in Finland after migration are still married, while most of those who got married outside Finland after migration are divorced.

Marriage Processes and Practices among Somalis in Diaspora

In this section, I describe three main dimensions of marriage process among Somalis in Finland: finding and selecting a spouse, organising the marriage and celebrations. Here, I pay particular attention to the differences between the marriage practices of the interviewees on the one hand and arranged or forced marriages on the other.

Finding and Choosing a Marriage Partner

Among Somalis in Finland, the role of the family in finding and choosing a marriage partner is important for various reasons. First, individuals mobilise their family networks in the marriage process because they see their involvement as useful. For example, they draw on the family's support in finding a suitable partner and making an informed decision. Second, family members see their support of loved ones in the marriage process as a moral obligation. Third, a parent's consent is considered vital for a successful marriage. However, as a rule, it is up to the future spouses to find and decide on their marriage partners in the first place; the role of the family is mainly to support them.

Unlike in nomadic contexts (Lewis 1994: 34), in the cities, both in Somalia and in the diaspora, interactions between marriageable men and women are more frequent and attraction occurs in a number of arenas, e.g. public spaces, schools, mosques, youth associations, relatives' houses and cyberspace. The following example illustrates one of the ways in which people meet potential spouses.

Saxarla,[5] a 26-year-old single woman, once arranged to meet a friend in an area frequented by Somalis in Helsinki. While she was with this friend, they also met the friend's husband, who was coming out of a mosque in the neighbourhood with his friend. Her friend's husband exchanged a few words with her and presented his own friend to her. After they finished their meeting, the two young women went home. In the evening, Saxarla's friend called her, 'Saxarla, you're never gonna believe this! Your number is needed!' The young man, who was with her friend's husband, was trying to get in touch with her. Although Saxarla initially hesitated, her friend persuaded her to accept the initiation of the relationship.

As Saxarla's story illustrates, men are expected to make the first move to initiate the relationship. A common feature of this process is that, to a great extent, a well-intentioned matchmaker,[6] relative or friend, may play a role. The role of the matchmaker may be to make the referral. The following example shows how a sibling can indirectly play a role in this process. In this example, the future husband of Sureer was a close friend of her brother, and the latter used to talk about his friend's good personal qualities at home long before Sureer's relationship with her husband. Her brother even used to say 'Sureer, you are a difficult person and he (his friend) alone can have a cohesive and resilient family with you'. Although the marriage relationship was initiated by her husband, her brother's suggestions attracted her curiosity and guided her attention towards her prospective husband.

As Saxarla's case illustrates, the matchmaker may also play the go-between role and navigate the process until the couple establishes contact. Others go beyond that by persuading their loved one to accept a particular marriage that they believe would work for the latter. In many of the cases in our data, it is the matchmaker that built the bridge or initiated the possibility of the whole idea of marriage. So the role of the extended family is vital here.

There are various reasons for the family's involvement. For instance, such an intervention is needed when the prospective spouses live in different locations. Few of those informants who were married after they or their potential spouse moved to Finland knew their spouses prior to the marriage process. Nearly one-half of those who married after they migrated to Finland found their partner in another country. This kind of transnational engagement further extends the family's role in the marriage process (Al-Sharmani & Ismail 2017). In some cases, members of the extended family are delegated to run the whole process. In the beginning of the 1990s, the majority of those Somalis who migrated to the West were young men. For instance, in 1992, more than three-quarters of Finnish-Somalis at the age of 15–34 were men. Few of these young men were married before they migrated to Finland. Many of those who were single travelled to the Horn of Africa and elsewhere in the world to find a marriage partner.

Buulle, a 52-year-old married man, was among those who, rather than travelling, mobilised his transnational social networks to find a

suitable bride. His uncle, who was in another European country, was convinced that his friend's granddaughter (who was at that time living in that country with her grandfather) would make a perfect match for his nephew. Both Buulle and his prospective wife accepted the proposal after their profiles, including photos, had matched their preferences. All marriage processes were held in that other country and Buulle's uncle represented him in all aspects of the process. Nonetheless, Buulle covered most of the incurred expenses.

Saluugla, who met her Finnish-Somali prospective husband in Africa, confirmed that she was originally interested to marry someone with whom she could live in the West. Thus, migration could be an element in the selection process for the partner who resides in Africa. However, unlike the practice of some migrant groups, where the young people and/or their parents prefer a spouse who is a resident in the parents' country of origin (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Liversage & Rytter 2015), Finnish-Somalis prefer a spouse residing in Finland (Al-Sharmani & Ismail 2017), and cross-border marriage is more like a 'conscious negotiation process' responding to 'challenges in the local marriage market' generated by a combination of 'demographic structures and social networks' (Bonjour & Kraler 2015: 1415). Sham marriage, where a young Finnish-Somali may deceive public authorities for someone to gain immigration, may exist, but regarding the community norms, this is not considered a marriage but a deception. In many of these cases it is the siblings or other unmarriageable family members who would present themselves as a new couple to mislead the authorities. Therefore, among Finnish-Somalis, transnational marriage cannot be considered as a main strategy for migration.

The interview data suggests that the right to choose one's spouse was also present in pre-Civil War Somalia. In the case of some informants who got married in pre-Civil War Somalia before they migrated to Finland, their families were not necessarily involved in the process of finding a spouse and making the marriage decision. For instance, Siraad, a 40-year-old married woman, noted that she first met her husband on the road between Qoryooley and Mogadishu, while the car she was travelling in had broken down. Her future husband, with other young men, gave her and her friends a lift to Mogadishu. She exchanged telephone numbers with him during this trip.

Unlike among some other migrant groups (Liversage 2012; Rytter 2012: 576), in general, among the Finnish-Somalis, the couple lead the selection and decision-making processes, but they seek their parents' consent later. Conversely, among some other migrant groups, parents not only lead the decision-making process but believe that it is their duty and obligation to find eligible matches for their children (Liversage 2012; Rytter 2012: 576).

Notably, after the attraction, with or without a matchmaker, the process of courtship starts. Six months to a year is considered the ideal duration for courtship. Here the main purpose is often to filter out potential marriageable partners. The initial stages of the screening process, the background check (i.e. clan identity, educational level and employment status), immediately begin. This is done by mobilising one's social networks to find accurate information about the potential spouse.

If the social characteristics of the partner are adequate, then his or her attitudes and values towards the main areas relevant for married life (from their preferred marriage and family-life styles to compatibility of their attitudes towards general public issues, such as politics, culture and education) are deliberated upon in one way or another.

In the diaspora, as well as in the cities back home, before parents become aware of the relationship, the couple might meet in various places outside the woman's home, such as in the house of the woman's friend, or they might go out for dinner.[7] Later, after the parents are informed, they could meet at the woman's home. However, telephones, Skyping and social media are also extensively utilised. The following is an example of how these different mechanisms and venues are used in different stages of the process.

In the first stages of the process, Suubban, a 24-year-old married woman, avoided any medium of communication except email. The telephone was used only later, after the initial stages of the relationship had developed more seriously. Thirdly, meetings outside the home, mainly in a cafeteria, followed. Finally, after the family was informed and the fiancé was presented to them, meetings usually took place in the family's house.

It is more likely that siblings and close friends are informed about the relationship first, while parents are alerted about the situation after that. In addition to parents, many of the siblings and friends feel morally obliged to support their loved ones in finding the right spouse. They may therefore play multiple roles at this stage by helping to gather the right information and by encouraging them. Saxarla's story and the instrumental role played by her older sisters in the process constitute a good example.

Soon after the relationship commenced, her prospective husband informed her that he had made his decision to proceed and asked her if they could inform the parents about the situation. Saxarla, unhappy with that, asked for the process to be postponed. She also informed her married sisters, who are close to her, about the situation. Her sisters, particularly one who used to live in Finland, initially mobilised their networks to learn more about this young man and soon learned that he was a perfect match for their younger sister. They started persuading Saxarla, whose problem was the lack of romantic attachment (which she described 'as lack of chemistry') to her fiancé, to approve the process. In persuading her, they focussed on two main attributes of this young man, his personal qualities and his attitudes towards members of his extended family, especially those in need of his help. Saxarla highlighted, 'My sister asked, "Saxarla, think about this! This man who is helping members of his extended family at that level, how will he be treating his wife?" She meant, he will be there for her!' And Saxarla added, mixing Finnish with her Somali, '*Kulli wey igu dhiiri galinaayeen laakiin, loppujen lopuksi, go'aanka ani waaye*! (They all encouraged me to do it but, after all, the decision is mine!)'

In our data, there were two cases in which a parent was the main actor in the selection process. In one case, the informant was in Finland, while the future wife was in Somalia; in the other case, the informant was in Somalia and her future husband was in Finland. However, they both fully consented and played an active role in the process.

There were also two cases of consanguineous marriage, one male and one female, and in both cases, the prospective husbands, rather than parents, initiated the marriage idea. Therefore, consanguineous marriages may happen among the Somalis, however – unlike in some other cultures, where marrying the first cousin is considered ideal (Liversage & Rytter 2015; Rytter 2012) – these types of marriages are quite rare among the dominant Somali groups (with nomadic cultural background) and sometimes the first cousin marriage is somewhat taboo.

To sum up, the data shows that the involvement of the family in the spouse selection process does not necessarily indicate lack of agency on the part of future spouses. On the contrary, the couple are the main actors in the selection and decision-making processes. Clearly, individuals draw on the support of their family members,

including their transnational networks, in meeting and finding suitable partners and in making informed decisions.

Organising the Marriage Process

Somali families play an instrumental role in their children's marriages, from matchmaking to organising a successful wedding ceremony. Naturally, to be part of the process, the marriage proposal should be acceptable for the parent. Thus, parental approval is quite essential for a socially acceptable and potentially successful marriage, and most informants believe that the role of the family is important. Therefore, as noted earlier, unlike the common arranged marriages – in which the parents take the leading role and main decisions but are expected to seek their children's consent (Pande 2015: 173) – in Somali marriages, the future spouses take the leading role themselves and make the major decisions. But they are expected to seek their parents' consent. Thus, in the normal procedure, a parent's role comes later in the process.

Suubban, who married a Muslim Finn, noted that one day, her classmate in a course on Arabic language (her future spouse) approached her by asking if she could give him her father's telephone number. By asking for her father's number, he revealed his intention to ask for her hand in marriage. Suubban told:

> I said to him hold on! Religiously your action might be ok, but (as Somalis) we have got a culture and approaching my father in this way will mean that I agreed with you on that … and my dad will misunderstand the situation.

As a recently married young man put it, when parents learn about the situation, they may send 'a red light or a green light'. The red light indicates the parents' rejection of the marriage idea, mainly due to the clan identity of the partner, and green light indicates that the parents are open to the idea. In the case of the red light, the situation becomes very disappointing as parental approval is considered important by both women and men for a successful marriage. In this case, the couple may abandon the marriage idea. They may alternatively take on the long and challenging process of trying to convince their parents to accept the process. According to our informants, this works well for some. Furthermore, elopement, traditionally practiced by young lovers in Somalia (Luling & Adam 2015: 155-156; Tiilikainen, Ismail & Al-Sharmani 2016: 49), is disappearing in the diaspora. There is no example of elopement in our data. One reason for this may be that many religious leaders discourage this practice and instead recommend other options. I encountered one case of parental rejection: in a ceremony that I attended, I learned that the groom's mother initially strongly rejected the proposal due to the girl's clan background, although she relented in the end. These cases clearly confirm that it is up to the couple to decide on their partners, and the parent's role normally comes later.

In the case of the green light, the process of organising the marriage commences. Here, the man may start visiting the woman's house and introduce himself to the woman's family members, particularly to his prospective mother-in-law.

Bariise, a 27-year-old husband-to-be, met his soon-to-be mother-in-law and, after a while, he met his prospective father-in-law, once the couple were ready for marriage. In addition to learning more about their prospective son-in-law, the main goal of the meeting between Bariise and his in-laws was the latter's intention to make sure that everything was all right with the process.

At this point, another phase of the process – namely, the *doonis* (marriage proposal) – starts. The groom, along with his male relatives, occasionally also joined by his friends, meets the bride's male relatives and his representatives ask for the bride's hand. The *doonis* often takes place at the bride's home – commonly, her parents prepare a special dinner for the guests – and occasionally at the mosque. Unlike other marriage proposals, e.g. *rishta* among the Pakistanis (Shaw & Charsley 2006), *doonis* is primarily proposing a marriage in a socially acceptable and culturally dignified way.

All *doonis* meetings I attended began with welcoming speeches by a member of the hosting group, a member of the woman's relatives, a representative of the mosque, etc. Then a spokesperson for the man's side thanked the hosts and delivered the *doonis* speech, after which the spokesperson for the woman's side delivered their speech. The spokesman of the fiancé's side thanked the fiancée's representatives for accepting the proposal, and then a respected member from the fiancé's side handed over the *sooryo* or *gabbaati* (betrothal gift), a small amount of money gift-wrapped in a *cimaamad* (men's Muslim headscarf).

After a marriage proposal is accepted and the gift is handed over, the groom's side may request that the *nikaax* process, completion of the formal marriage contract, take place immediately thereafter. However, since all the main issues, such as the kind and amount of *meher/mahr* (the bride's personal dowry) must be agreed upon before the *nikaax* ceremony, that request happens only if parties have already negotiated and approved the process. It is up to the couples to decide these issues, but both families, particularly the bride's family, may have considerable influence in the negotiations. For instance, all female informants agreed that it is up to the bride to decide what she wants as *meher* and the family's role is that of guidance and advice.

The groom is also expected to give a gift of jewellery, mainly a relatively large gold jewellery set (including earrings, necklace, ring and probably bracelets), to the bride, and few husbands fail to provide it. Suubban noted:

> He happened to be a non-Somali husband, otherwise I would have demanded ten thousand euros for the gold gift or at least five thousand euros would have been the minimum amount acceptable to me. But poor him! He brought with him only two thousand euros for the gold. I just took it because I was too kind to him

Certainly, very few brides receive €10,000 for a jewellery gift. This is quite a specific case with a young woman keen to make a point to her non-Somali husband as to how important it is for her to follow her cultural norms. Nevertheless, it shows how such a gift is vital for the Somali bride.

Prior to the *aroos* (wedding), and possibly *nikaax*, ceremony, a new residence is prepared for the new family. It is often the woman who chooses furniture for the new house. Although in the diaspora, more women, particularly of the younger generation, contribute to the costs of setting up the new matrimonial house, this responsibility is perceived primarily as belonging to the husband, who often receives support from his transnational family network to deal with the expenses.

Saado, a 22-year-old single woman, stressed that 'in our culture, when marrying a Somali girl, you (the husband) have to pay the *meher*, furnish the new house, buy gold for her. Certainly, that is our culture!'

Normally, the bride's family organises almost all the activities in the marriage process. The groom is usually expected to be available

to provide his services, by setting up the new furniture, support shopping activities, etc.

In some immigrant groups, newly married young couples customarily start their marriage life in a household headed by the parent of one of the young spouses. Although there are practical and economic advantages for the new couple in this practice, it is possible that one or both of the young couple might face new challenges, ranging from feeling uncomfortable in her/his house to gross human right violations, including corporal and emotional abuse (Bonjour & Kraler 2015; Liversage 2012; Rytter 2012). Conversely, among the Finnish-Somalis, it is up to the young people to decide where to live and, in general, neither parents nor young couple prefer for the newlywed couple to live in the parents' house.

As noted, the family's involvement in the marriage process is considered positive; however, some informants mentioned that the family involvement is sometimes detrimental to the formation of the new family. Two particular factors, the clan identities of prospective spouses and financial factors, were seen as transforming parental involvement into a negative experience. A female participant in one of the focus groups highlighted that:

> … if you find a (marriageable) partner, the next challenge is that he might be distant from you, his clan may be different from yours and that may create misunderstandings within the family, that is quite possible! Another challenge is, in the weddings, one of the things people often complain about is the costs of weddings and stuff like that … It is possible that a mother wants her daughter's wedding ceremony to be held in Hotel Kämp, the most expensive hotel in the city, but the man may not be able to afford it.

Other participants of the focus group agreed that these kinds of parental interventions are problematic.[8]

Again, a partner's agency is quite evident in the *doonis* and other processes of organising a marriage, and the role of the family is to support.

Marriage Celebrations

After *doonis*, the *nikaax,* which could be organised on a separate day or on the same day as the *aroos*, takes place. The period of time separating the *nikaax* and *aroos* can be as short as one day or up to several years, depending on the context. For instance, a married female informed us that her *aroos* ceremony was planned to take place after she finished her schooling, several years after her *nikaax*. In the diaspora, the *nikaax* may take place in the bride's family's house, in a mosque or in a rented hall. The event may not be exclusive to the two lineage groups, especially if it is held in the mosque or in a hall. As noted, the bride and groom normally reach an agreement about the *meher* in advance. In some cases, the *meher* could be something symbolic, such as a copy of the Qu'ran, a trip to Meccah for *umrah* or a gold ring. In the diaspora, many lean towards this option. Siman, a 28-year-old married woman, initially demanded €5,000 for her *meher*, but she later changed her mind by noting that since she is employed, she has little interest in securing such money for future safety.

The transnational context of many Somali families may necessitate the *nikaax* to be organised in another country, Somalia or elsewhere. This may be the case if the bride's parents are in that other country or it is a transnational marriage where the bride and groom live in different countries. In this latter case, the *nikaax* is often held in the bride's country.

Regarding the attendance, the actual site for *nikaax* is predominantly for men only. The women may be in other rooms of the same venue or the other side of a curtain-divided hall. The brides themselves rarely attend the ceremony. This, however, does not mean that brides were not involved in the process. On the contrary, as noted, they played a central role in the negotiation beforehand. When young female informants were asked whether they wanted to attend the *nikaax* or how they felt about not being there, they agreed that they did not feel the need to be present, and they did not feel excluded since they had already been involved in the negotiation. Thus, one informant was getting her hair done, in preparation for the wedding party, while the contract was taking place and her father called her to confirm the dowry amount and to let her know when the process was over.

In conducting the formal marriage contract, the role and presence of a Sheikh is imperative and, in general, the groom's party brings the Sheikh with them.

In one of the *nikaax* events that I participated in, there were about 200 male guests in the hall (women were in another hall). The event coordinator opened the event by welcoming the guests, thanking the bride's parent for organising the event and highlighting that the *doonis* process had been conducted and that this was a *nikaax* event. After that, he gave the floor to the Sheikh, who conducted the contract and gave a short speech about marriage. Following short speeches of selected individuals, the banquet was served, and the male guests left.

Regarding who participates, separated from the *nikaax* ceremony, there are two main types of wedding ceremonies: a women-only ceremony and a mixed-gender ceremony. Men-only wedding party is uncommon among Somalis (see also Tiilikainen 2003: 188–196).

In addition, different versions of the *todoba-bax, shaash-saar* (mainly a women-only ceremony, partially held to symbolise the bride's transition from girlhood to womanhood) or *gaaf* are also practised (Tiilikainen, Ismail & Al-Sharmani 2016: 51).

In short, ideally, the bride's family organises the *nikaax* and *aroos* ceremonies. However, the spouses, particularly the bride, are the main decision-makers here too. They decide where, when and how to conduct these ceremonies. However, the bride's family, as organisers of the ceremonies, naturally has its say in these processes.

Conclusion

In this article, I have studied the processes and practices of Somali marriages in Finland and in doing so, I have paid particular attention to three dimensions of the marriage process (spouse selection, marriage arrangements and celebrations). By describing these dimensions, I examined how the presence of parental involvement and transitional marriage practices of the Finnish-Somali marriages may render their marriages into conventionally defined arranged, or forced, marriages.

The Somali family plays an instrumental role in their children's marriages, from matchmaking to organising a successful wedding ceremony. Several factors encourage parents and other family members to be involved in the marriages. First, the fact of living in the diaspora makes finding a suitable partner a challenging task in different ways; thus, members of transnational family networks may feel morally obliged to support their loved ones. Second, concerned with their children's well-being, parents invest considerable effort in guiding their children about the importance of certain socioeconomic factors, such as education, employment, religion, etc., to help their

child make what they think is a rational decision and to dissuade them from making ill-informed choices based purely on romantic grounds. Finally, though weakening, factors such as clan are still important in the community.

The transnational dimension and deep family involvement in the process of Somali marriage is what most resembles the features of an arranged marriage. However, neither the arranged marriage in its conventional meaning (Home Office 2000: 10; Shaw & Charsley 2006: 416),[9] in which parents decide whom their children would marry, nor the forced marriage is commonly practiced. Most of our informants agree that it is up to the individual to find and decide when, how and whom to marry. The role of the family is to support their loved one to secure a happy married life. However, parents' consent to marriage proposal is always considered essential. Thus, a Somali marriage may fall into the category of what Stopes-Roe and Cochrane (1990: 30) describe as an independent arranged marriage, where the person makes her or his own selection and decision on whom to marry, but 'it is expected that the parents also will be satisfied; in British families, this may be a hope rather than an expectation.'

In short, unlike the common arranged marriages – in which parents take the leading role and make the main decisions but are still expected to seek their children's consent – in Somali marriages, it is the future spouses who take the leading role and make the major decisions, even if they seek their parents' consent. Therefore, this article illustrates that the assumed binaries between traditional and modern, arranged and love marriages, are simplistic and invalid in the context of Somali marriages. The family's role does not negate the agency of women and men in selecting their spouse, nor their autonomy in the marriage arrangements. Perhaps it would make more sense to describe Somali marriages as family-facilitated marriages, rather than family-arranged marriages. In addition, Finnish-Somalis prefer neither a cousin marriage nor a spouse in their parents' country of origin. Finally, neither young couples nor their parents prefer for the newlywed couple to live in their parents' homes. Thus, this article shows that Muslim marriage in the West is not as a rule detrimental to human rights and the welfare system and is not principally a strategy for migration.

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Notes

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2. For instance, after coming to power in Denmark in 2001, the Liberal-Conservative government introduced a new law setting the minimum age of both spouses applying for family reunification at 24 years or older.
3. I loosely use the term 'diaspora' as a group of people who live outside their home country for some time, but who maintain some ties with their country of origin (Remennick 2007). For more on the diaspora, see Safran (1991) and Cohen (1997).
4. Statistics Finland, Population Structure.
5. All names are pseudonyms.
6. Here, I use the term 'matchmaker' loosely for anyone contributing to the process of mate selection.
7. In order to preserve their reputations, many girls are reluctant to go out with men before the process of integration commences.
8. However, a well-informed religious scholar told me that the number of cases where parents reject the proposal on the basis of the clan affiliation of the potential spouse of their child is decreasing significantly.
9. Stopes-Roe and Cochrane (1990: 30) call this a 'traditionally modified arranged marriage'.

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